

## ISSUE: Why Students Drop Out

### Introduction

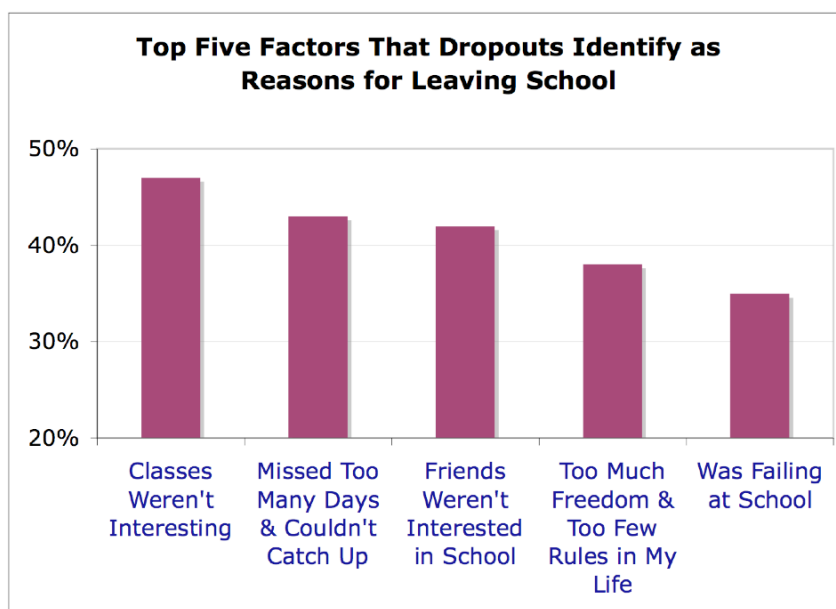
In the United States, more than a million students who enter 9th grade each fall fail to graduate with their peers four years later.<sup>1</sup> In Virginia, more than 10,000 students drop out each year. The reasons why students drop out of high school are varied and hard to document with precision. The extensive academic literature on the subject makes several general points:

- Students don't usually drop out for a single reason. Multiple factors are at play, and no single risk factor can accurately predict who will drop out.
- Dropping out is best thought of as a process, not an event. The factors leading to a decision for dropping out play out over years.
- Dropouts are not a homogeneous group, but early warning signs can help identify those most at risk.

### Why Students Drop Out

There are many reasons students drop out. Much of the research is focused on what are called 'risk factors.' The goal is to help identify potential dropouts in order to target interventions that might keep the child in school. The root causes are varied and interrelated and it is impossible to identify direct causality in any general sense.

One approach to finding out why students drop out is to ask the dropouts themselves. The following chart lists the top five reasons identified as reasons for dropping out by about 500 dropouts from the Philadelphia and Baltimore areas.<sup>2</sup>





The high percentages indicate that dropouts usually identified more than one contributing factor in their decision to drop out. The Virginia Commission on Youth conducted roundtables in 2008 with more than 70 students to identify factors leading to truancy and dropping out.<sup>3</sup> The top factors were:

• Lack of motivation	• Family problems at home	• Gang violence
• Drug abuse	• Bullying	• Negative peer pressure
• Teenage pregnancy	• Stress and anxiety	• Boredom

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network sponsored an extensive survey of the literature on dropouts in order to summarize known risk factors – that is, those indicators that are associated with high rates of dropping out.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1  
Significant Risk Factors by School Level

Risk Category/Risk Factor	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Individual Background Characteristics			
• Has a learning disability or emotional disturbance		*	*
Early Adult Responsibilities			
• High Number of Work Hours		*	*
• Parenthood			*
Social Attitudes, Values & Behavior			
• High-risk peer group		*	*
• High-risk social behavior		*	*
• Highly socially active out of school			*
School Performance			
• Low achievement	*	*	*
• Retention/over-age for grade	*	*	*
School Engagement			
• Poor attendance		*	*
• Low educational expectations		*	*
• Lack of effort		*	*
• Low commitment to school		*	*
• No extracurricular participation		*	*
School Behavior			
• Misbehavior	*	*	*
• Early Aggression	*	*	
Family Background Characteristics			
• Low socioeconomic status	*	*	*
• High family mobility		*	
• Low education level of parents	*	*	*
• Large number of siblings	*		*
• Not living with both natural parents	*	*	*
• Family disruption	*		
Family Engagement/Commitment to Education			
• Low educational expectations		*	
• Sibling has dropped out		*	*
• Low contact with school		*	
• Lack of conversation about school		*	*

NOTE: The asterisk indicates that the risk factor has been shown to be a statistically significant indicator in data-driven research of the risk factors for dropping out.



Appendix A describes some of the reasons why students drop out as summarized in recent reports from two states, Pennsylvania and Washington.

A list of risk factors similar to those in Table 1 was presented to the Virginia Board of Education's Graduation and Dropout Committee meeting in March of 2007. That list is more expansive and includes community and school factors.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2  
Root Causes for School Dropouts

Student Factors	Community Factors
• Poor attitude toward school	• Lack of support services
• Low self esteem	• High crime rate
• Low ability level	• Few links between school & community
• Attendance/truancy problems	• Lack of financial support
• Behavior/discipline problems	
• Pregnancy	School Factors
• Drug/alcohol abuse	• Negative school climate
• Non-participation at school	• Disregard for individual learning styles
• Friends who dropped out	• Inconsistent discipline enforcement
• Illness	• Lack of adequate counseling
• Family problems	• Lack of relevant curriculum
	• Passive instructional techniques
Family Factors	• Poor use of technology
• Lack of parental involvement	• High retention
• Low parental expectations	• High suspension rates
• Non-English speaking home	• Low expectations of students
• Dysfunctional home life	• Lack of adequate ESL instruction
• Abuse	
• High mobility	
• Parents who dropped out	

The 2007 Annual Report on the Condition and Needs of Public Schools in Virginia includes information on the ethnicity of dropouts in Virginia. The following table was adapted from that report. Data for the 2006 – 2007 school year were added but are incomplete because the totals for students in each subgroup were not available and it was not possible to construct population percentages.<sup>6</sup>



**Table 3**  
**Virginia Statewide Dropout Information by Ethnic Subgroup**  
 (Shown as a percentage of total enrollment by subgroup in Grades 7 through 12)

Student Subgroup	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
All Students	10,381 / 1.86%	10,608 / 1.88%	10,619 / 1.87%
Female	4,302 / 1.58%	4,265 / 1.55%	4,352
Male	6,079 / 2.13%	6,343 / 2.2%	6,267
Subgroups			
Unspecified	75 / 1.58%	98 / 1.52%	116
African American	3,597 / 2.44%	3,992 / 2.65%	4,150
Hispanic	1,801 / 5.28%	1,585 / 4.32%	1,521
White	4,475 / 1.31%	4,564 / 1.34%	4,495
Asian	398 / 1.47%	322 / 1.15%	295
American Indian	32 / 2.05%	42 / 2.48%	37
Native Hawaiian	<	<	5
Other Categories			
Students with disabilities	1,519 / 1.99%	1,739 / 2.28%	N/A
Economically disadvantaged	2,818 / 2.04%	3,133 / 2.22%	N/A
Limited English proficiency	964 / 3.58%	1,238 / 4.30%	N/A

The table reports dropouts during a specific school year – often referred to as event dropout rates – and is much different than Virginia's graduation rate, which was 76.8% in 2006-2007. The graduation rate is currently measured as the number of graduates divided by the number of students in ninth grade at that school four years ago. This measure has several weaknesses, one of which is its inability to account for transfers in and out of school district. Therefore, a school district that is growing will have more transfers in than out and may report a relatively inflated graduation rate. Districts that are losing students through out-migration or are holding a high number of students back might have artificially low graduation rates.

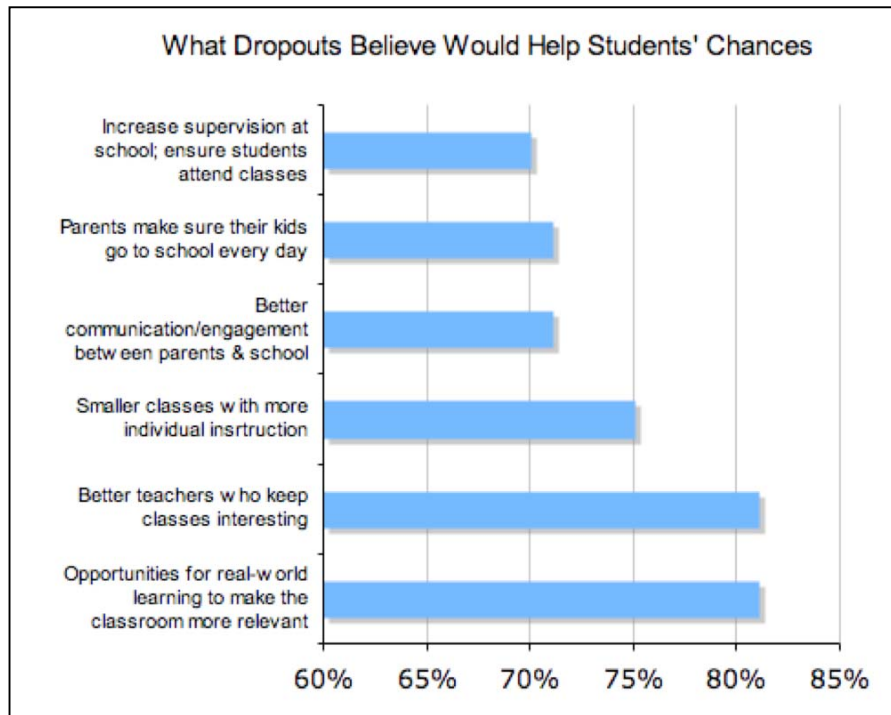
The lack of good information on dropouts and graduation rates helps mask the growing problem of poor graduation rates. Without a standard method of calculation or good database systems that track individual students, school districts and states estimate dropout and graduation rates. Researchers suggest that these estimates have tended to underestimate dropout and overestimate graduation rates. Recent research<sup>7</sup> estimates that the national completion rate is about 66 percent, and that the completion rate for Hispanic and African-American students may be as low as 50 percent in many areas, further underscoring the need for more precise data.

Virginia has implemented a new Education Management Information System that will more accurately report graduation rates beginning with the 2007-2008 school year. The system can track students across school years and can account for transfers in and out of the school district. This cohort graduation rate will help researchers more accurately identify real rates by region and by characteristics of the student.



## What Students Say Will Help Prevent Dropping Out

In *The Silent Epidemic*<sup>2</sup> researchers interviewed about 500 dropouts from a variety of backgrounds in the Baltimore and Philadelphia areas. The survey included a question on what might help prevent other students from dropping out. The following chart summarizes the top six responses.



The Virginia Commission on Youth, in its June 2008 presentation, summarized the resources and steps that youth thought might help curb truancy and school dropouts.

Table 4  
Resources and Steps That Youth Identified as Helpful

Resources	Steps
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• After school activities and centers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anonymous peer counselors</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Older teens as mentors</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Additional tutoring for standardized tests</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Positive community leaders</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Programs to improve low self-esteem</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Youth counselors</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Changing the image of attending school</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family court</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stiffer penalties for chronic truants</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mandatory GPAs to participate in sports</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide after school jobs</li><li>• Increase teacher training</li></ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improve school security</li></ul>



## Predicting Who Will Drop Out

Predicting who will drop out has been a major challenge for researchers. Many students have one or more of the risk factors listed in Tables 1 and 2 and most graduate. Using one or a few indicators has been shown to be ineffective in predicting a majority of dropouts.<sup>8</sup> Without better assessment mechanisms, schools might serve too many students, many of who will graduate without the expensive intervention, or the wrong students.

However, a few studies using longitudinal data permit analysts to follow the progress of individual students as they move from grade to grade as members of a cohort (hence the term cohort graduation rate). This research has shown that school systems can effectively identify potential dropouts with high enough accuracy to confidently target interventions.<sup>9</sup> Schools can identify who is most likely to drop out by identifying students who:

- Receive poor grades in core subjects,
- Have low attendance records,
- Fail to be promoted to the next grade, and
- Are disengaged in the classroom.

A study in Philadelphia tracked students in a longitudinal survey from the 6th grade through graduation or dropping out of high school.<sup>10</sup> The researchers found that a 6th grader with even one of the following four signals had at least a three in four chance of dropping out of high school:

- A final grade of F in mathematics.
- A final grade of F in English.
- Attendance below 80 percent for the year.
- A final “unsatisfactory” behavior mark in at least one class.

Students exhibiting more than one factor – for example, failing a class and missing a lot of school – had an even higher probability of dropping out within six years. The researchers also looked at data for a cohort of 8th graders and found that failing a core subject or poor attendance were highly predictive of dropping out, identifying half the future dropouts. Interestingly, the study suggested that special attention should be paid to “distress signals” in the 6th grade; the earlier a student sends one of these signals the greater the risk that he or she will drop out.

A study using a longitudinal database for Chicago students led to the development of an on-track indicator that signals when 9th graders are at serious risk for dropping out.<sup>11</sup> The researchers analyzed four high school risk factors – attendance, grade point average, credits earned, and failing grades – and found that combining two of them was 85 percent successful in predicting which members of the freshman class would not graduate. A student is considered to be on-track at the end of 9th grade if he or she has earned enough course credits to earn promotion to the 10th grade while receiving no more than one F in core academic subjects.

The Chicago researchers were also able to demonstrate that high schools themselves play a substantial role in determining whether students stay on track, independent of risk factors that students bring with them. The data showed that even after controlling for student-level risk factors related to race, gender, prior academic achievement, family socioeconomic status, and



being overage for grade, high schools varied enormously in both their 9th grade on-track rates and in their graduation rates.

## Summary

Researchers generally agree that there is no one or small set of risk factors that can be used to accurately predict who will drop out of school. However, the growing availability of longitudinal data will provide powerful tools for identifying key indicators (such as 6th grade performance) or risk factors (behavioral issues) that can be used to help administrators target and evaluate their dropout prevention programs. Another implication for Virginia is that the longitudinal data will allow analysts to more accurately – and fairly – assess school performance by controlling for student-level risk factors such as socioeconomic status and past academic achievement.



## Appendix A

### Why Students Drop Out: A Perspective From Other States

During the literature search for this Issue Insight a number of state reports and policy guides developed in other states came to light. In general, these echo what is detailed in the literature, but two tables from these reports are reproduced here to strengthen the perspective that the reasons students drop out are varied, interrelated, and difficult to measure.

#### Pennsylvania

The Pennsylvania Department of Education published a report, Public Secondary School Dropouts in Pennsylvania 2005-06, for the state General Assembly in August 2007. The report includes this table:

Table A-1  
Dropouts by Program and Reason, 2005-06

	Percentages				
	Total	Academic	Voc/Tech	Exceptional	General
Disliked School	44.5	45.4	38.8	54.0	44.6
Wanted to Work	18.5	14.3	21.6	16.7	19.0
Academic Problem	17.7	20.5	19.0	11.2	17.4
Behavioral Problem	8.6	9.5	9.5	9.0	8.0
Child Care, Marriage, or Pregnancy	7.2	6.1	8.5	6.4	7.3
Runaway or Expelled	3.5	4.2	2.6	2.7	3.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100

While each of the columns total to 100 percent, the data are based on only 49 percent of dropouts. The remainder fails to give schools exit interviews or school records don't exist. This ratio does not seem unusual, and dropouts often cite how easy it was to drop out and how no one followed up with them or their parents.

#### Washington State

The State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington prepared a report, Helping Students Finish School: Why Students Drop Out and How to Help Them Graduate, that summarizes the reasons given for dropping out. This report examines the risk factors associated with dropping out and includes an extensive survey of the literature.<sup>12</sup>





Table A-2  
Reasons Given for Dropping Out  
Washington Students in Grades 9-12 (School Year 2003-2004)

	All Grades	% of Total	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Location unknown*	9,105	49.6%	2,556	2,519	2,381	1,649
School not for me / stayed home	2,899	15.8%	801	696	788	614
Lacked progress / poor grades	1,179	6.4%	270	278	304	327
Left to take GED	1,441	7.8%	148	328	575	390
Other or unknown reasons	1,365	7.4%	323	323	383	336
Attended school 4 years, did not continue	845	4.6%	27	18	121	679
Expelled / Suspended / drugs or alcohol	731	4.0%	240	218	178	95
Offered training, chose to work	547	3.0%	72	122	192	161
Married, family support, or child related	253	1.4%	49	59	65	80
Total	18,365	100%	4,486	4,561	4,987	4,331

\* Nearly half of all dropouts were students who had an unknown location and had to be considered dropouts. It is not known why those students left school. In some cases, they may have transferred but there is no way to confirm it. This again highlights the historical lack of robust data on dropouts.



## Why Students Drop Out References

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5. Virginia Board of Education Graduation and Dropout Committee. *Minutes of the March 28, 2007 Meeting* documenting comments by Franklin P. Schargel, Senior Managing Associate, The School Success Network, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Also, see the minutes from the January 10, 2007 meeting documenting a presentation by Karen Burke Morison, Civic Enterprises, LLC on *The Silent Epidemic* (1).
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